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Distance Learning Issue Paper

Diploma Mills

Meet Colby Nolan: A successful graduate with a 3.5 GPA and a MBA degree under his belt. Surely any corporation would be more than happy to add Colby Nolan to their workforce. The problem is Colby is a cat and would have to meow his acceptance of any job offers!

In the May 2005 edition of Reader's Digest, Michael Crowley describes how he obtained a diploma for his cat, Colby Nolan, from Trinity Southern University, a Texas-based diploma mill. For \$399 Colby received an embossed diploma and for an additional fee of \$99 purchased "a realistic transcript showing he'd earned A's and B's in classes that included accounting and finance." (Crowley, 2005, p. 27)

Crowley's article highlights an area of concern for the instructors and students involved in distance learning, as well as the potential employers of those graduates of online courses. Although diploma mills have been around for decades, the widespread use of the Internet has turned fraudulent credentials into big business. Coupled with the recent scrutiny of online schools in general, the diploma mills may have a negative effect on the perceived value of college degrees earned online.

While educators and students involved in distance education may debate whether a degree earned via distance learning or online is equivalent to a degree earned on campus, the general public may be more concerned about whether the degree is worth anything at all. The debate on “No significant difference between Distance Learning and traditional Face-to-Face instruction” is moot if employers doubt qualifications earned mainly online due to the shady reputations of diploma mills.

The problem is rampant. Crowley tells of persons with credentials from diploma mills working as public school teachers and doctors. Even more disturbing is the fact that the Government Accountability Office found employees with fake diplomas working for the U.S. Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security and Justice Department. In addition, the National Nuclear Security Administration was found to have three managers with false credentials who were granted a high-level security clearance. (Crowley, 2005, p. 30)

Many of these unscrupulous operators are very blatant in offering their services. I did a search for “diploma mills” on the Internet and was amazed at the results. Here are a few of the offers I found:

- **College Degree in 5 days?** Earn a Legal & Verifiable BA, MBA or PHD degree. No Coursework. Affordable.
<http://www.theshopontop.com/CollegeDegreesNow>
- **Instant Degree in 5 days.** MBA, BA, Doctorate and many more degrees. Delivered in 5 days. Affordable. Degree-In-5-Days.com

- **Get a Verifiable Degree.** Based on your experience. No Course Work or Testing! <http://www.edudegree.com>

Rusell Poulin, an associate director of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, is among the professionals working in various arenas of distance learning who are concerned about this issue. In an article written for PBS Campus Previews, Poulin compares finding a legitimate college or university offering distance learning to deciding if an email from a member of an African royal family offering a share of \$16 million is credible. He advises, “If an offer is too good to be true, then there is probably something wrong with that offer.”

The possibility of policing the entire Internet for diploma mills is impractical at best and so consumers of distance education and employers are left to conduct their own investigations as to the legitimacy of institutions offering online courses. One interesting twist to this problem is that there are a large number of options and sometimes small private institutions and community colleges offer better online courses than larger and often more prestigious traditional universities.

Poulin offers a checklist that would be useful for a student seeking a quality online course of study from a reputable college as well as for an employer concerned about the legitimacy of a potential employee’s credentials:

1. **Can you find it listed in a legitimate listing of colleges?** Poulin suggests *The Higher Education Directory*, a reference volume found at most local libraries.

Be sure to check that the name is exact since many fake colleges will adopt a slight variation on a legitimate name.

2. **Are there any oddities on their web site or in their promotional materials?** Red flags include a post office box, but no street address; a small list of courses offered; etc.
3. **Are they unwilling to answer simple questions?** You should be able to get answers about student enrollment, alumni, or policies without too much trouble.
4. **What is the tuition reimbursement policy?** Legitimate institutions allow a portion of the tuition to be refunded after several weeks into a course. A no refund policy or a very short refund deadline should cause concerns.
5. **What organization accredits the institution?** A good place to check on accreditation is the U.S. Department of Education's list of the accrediting agencies that they recognize.

<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/accreditation/natl agencies.html>

(Poulin, 2003).

What steps are being taken to remedy this problem? Right now, the situation seems to be "buyer beware!" Law enforcement agencies have not seen the proliferation of diploma mills online as a priority. However, in the case of non-qualified doctors practicing medicine, the results could be dire. Consider the case of Laurence Perry, convicted by a North Carolina jury in 2002 of practicing medicine without a license and for involuntary manslaughter. One of his unfortunate patients was an 8-year-old diabetic girl, who died while under Perry's unqualified care. (Crowley, 2005)

The U.S. Department of Education is concerned about the matter and not only has a database of all recognized accrediting institutions, but is also establishing a database of legitimate schools that could be used to identify fake diplomas and credentials. Oregon, New Jersey, North Dakota and Illinois now have laws that make it tough on diploma mills as well as individuals who use falsified credentials produced by such organizations.

Online learning offers opportunities that are more flexible than traditional modes of education. Students can take courses that can be worked into busy employment schedules or pursued at times that are more convenient. Shady operations that offer fake diplomas for sale on the Internet may cast serious doubts on all online courses. However, if those concerned with distance learning continue to educate the public on how to identify legitimate, worthwhile online programs, and support legal measures to stamp out such deceptive practices, the general public will cease to classify all online learning in the same manner. Media articles tend to play up the existence of the unscrupulous characters that run fake colleges, but neglect to inform their readers of the benefits provided by many accredited institutions to students who would not otherwise be able to complete a tertiary education degree. While the existence of diploma mills may be the blight on the potential of online learning, it will not have any lasting effect on the perceived value it has for all who seek to improve their lives through education.

Resources:

Crowley, Michael "Psst...Need a degree?" The Reader's Digest, May 2005: 27-30.

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Oct 1997
<http://distancelearn.about.com/gi/dynamic/offcist.htm?site=http://www.communication.ucsd/dl/ddm1.html>

Poulin, Russell "Avoiding fake colleges and diploma mills: If it's too good to be true, then it's too good to be true." PBS Campus Previews, March 2003.
http://www.pbs.org/campus/006_News/006-mar-03.html

Shearer, Rick "No Significant Difference and Distance Education." 26 Sept 2003
<http://www.distance-educator.com/dnews/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=7507&mode=&order=&thold>

"Training vs. Education Online Version." EDNET Newsletter, 28 Dec 1999
http://www.uen.org/News/article.cgi?category_id=6&article_id=159